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Group Discussion Topic No. 2

IS IT IN THE INTEREST OF THE NATION TO HAVE  
MORE -- OR FEWER -- PEOPLE LIVING ON LAND?

This material has been prepared to supply assistance for discussion groups. It is not intended to direct attention to any particular point of view. Neither is it presumed to be a complete or even an orderly presentation of the discussion possibilities of the topic. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion. It is intended to assist in creating opportunities for discussion in the belief that through intense discussion people may find ways of thinking through for themselves vital questions which require democratic decision.

The attention of discussion leaders and others is called particularly to the availability of "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods". This contains practical suggestions and information.

Copies of "Discussion: A Brief Guide to Methods," and copies of this and other group discussion topics can be obtained from the Department of Agriculture, Room 202, Washington, D. C., or by writing to the agricultural college of your state.

February, 1935.



Topic: IS IT IN THE INTEREST OF THE NATION TO HAVE  
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With the development of machinery and the rise of science and invention, a smaller and smaller proportion of the people have been dependent on tilling the land for a living. For many years prior to 1929, the United States had a heavy and probably almost continuous net migration of people from country to city. Since 1929, with the rise of unemployment, many people have gone "back to the land," and more people, mostly youth, have been backed up on farms because of inability to obtain work in the cities.

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1. SHOULD THIS NATION ENCOURAGE A LARGER RURAL POPULATION?
2. CAN MORE PEOPLE BE SUPPORTED BY COMMERCIAL FARMING?
3. CAN MORE PEOPLE BE SUPPORTED IN CITIES?
4. SHOULD THE UNEMPLOYED IN THE CITIES BE ENCOURAGED TO SETTLE ON FARMS?
5. SHOULD FARM BOYS AND GIRLS BE ENCOURAGED TO PLAN CITY CAREERS?
6. DOES A COMBINATION OF RURAL LIVING AND INDUSTRIAL EMPLOYMENT, OR PART-TIME FARMING AND PART-TIME INDUSTRIAL EMPLOYMENT, OFFER A PARTIAL SOLUTION TO OUR UNEMPLOYMENT AND POPULATION PROBLEMS?



## SOME PROS AND CONS

### I

#### A. A Large and Slowly Growing National Population is Needed

"There should be a large and slowly increasing national population. Farmers' markets depend principally upon the number of mouths to feed. City people are not reproducing themselves, and unless there is migration from the farms or from Europe will soon decline in number. Therefore, we should have a large farm population, with fairly large families on the land, so that farmers can send some of their sons and daughters to the cities, to maintain the urban population. Thus the welfare of farmers as well as of the nation depends upon our having a large population on the land.

"Only by having many fairly large farm families can we be assured of the quality of our future national population, because in the cities the more ambitious, intelligent, and capable people, notably the professional, business and clerical classes, generally have very small families while the large families occur among the least capable. On the farm the more capable people have almost as many children as the less capable. So important is this matter of the quality of the population that we may be justified in subsidizing agriculture or parenthood on farms. Furthermore, the cities should pay a good part of the costs of rural schools, health and recreation facilities, because many farm boys and girls eventually go to live in the urban places."

#### B. The Present National Population is Too Large

"We do not need a big national population. What we need are high standards of living in country and city, with plenty of leisure, and enough money to permit each family to travel and to give the children a higher education. Farm families should aim for a high standard of living, with as many mechanical conveniences and cultural opportunities as city families have. Fewer people in the nation would permit a higher standard of living.

"Life on the farm is inferior to city life. It is in the cities that we have the best schools, the best doctors, the best facilities for recreation and leisure. Farmers should demand a standard of living, and social services equal to the best, and should be willing to fight until their demands are secured."







## II

### A. There are Too Many Farmers

"There are already too many farmers. Farmers now compete keenly with one another for the markets that are available. Our farmers could produce much more if prices were fair and markets were better. We need fewer, not more farm families. Furthermore, the market for farm products is more limited than that for industrial products. Urban industry can produce the products for which there is an opportunity to expand markets."

"Because of this condition, urban unemployed should be kept in the cities. There is more wealth and income in the cities than in the country. Let the cities buy food for their own unemployed. Unemployed industrial workers should not be encouraged to come out to the country and compete with the farmers. Moreover, if the unemployed do come to the country in large numbers, they will only add to the burden farmers are carrying. The children of the unemployed must be educated and often they and their parents must be fed."

### B. Unemployed City People Should go Back to the Land

"Many of our cities cannot provide in the future the employment they have in the past. Some of their unemployed are going back to the land, no matter who likes it or doesn't like it. Labor-saving devices are continuing to displace workers in trade and industry. Moreover, the unemployed are growing older and city industries will not hire many of them because of age."

"Relief costs can be reduced by placing part of the unemployed industrial workers on the land. This will enable them to raise some produce and contribute something to their own support. Such work will add to their self-respect. Their children will grow up under a better environment than they would in the cities. These unemployed people should be able to develop local industries in the country, and their gardening and poultry raising would not compete noticeably with the products of commercial farmers."

## III

### A. Industry Should be Further Decentralized

"We need to decentralize industry. Industries generally should be encouraged to locate at points where labor is cheap and also, if possible, close to the sources of raw materials. This would result in lowering production and distribution costs."



"A decentralized industry would make our economic life more stable. It would probably result in a new type of a community, part farming, part industrial. And there would be greater security in such a community than we now generally have. Moreover, rural workers who own their homes and are more or less dependent upon a local industry for their livelihood are less likely to develop militant labor organizations."

#### IV

#### B. Industrial Decentralization is Inadvisable

"The idea of decentralizing industry is pretty much of a pipe dream. Corporations cannot afford to sacrifice their heavy investments in city factories. Some industries, such as steel mills, simply cannot decentralize, no matter how much people may want them to do so. There is no evidence that industry has decentralized to any great extent. This would appear to indicate that there is not much advantage to industry in doing so."

"On the other hand there are many advantages to urban industry in concentrating their workers at one or a few points. Concentration reduces the costs of supervision, and permits mass production. Workers living in cities are likely to have more numerous and varied opportunities for employment than have workers living in rural areas. Moreover, since rural residents are more likely to own their homes, it is harder for them to move to another location if such a move is necessary in order to obtain employment. It is usually easier to organize labor in the cities for collective bargaining than is true when workers are scattered in many small plants distant from each other."



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